**Young People and Gangs**

**Santina Perrone and Rob White**

**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE**

**OF CRIMINOLOGY**

Over 150 years ago, the Cabbage Tree Hat Mob, one of the prominent “youth gangs” of the time, reputedly annoyed respectable Sydneysiders. Since then, there have been periodic expressions of public concern regarding youth group formations in major Australian urban centres.

This paper provides an insight into perceptions of, and research into,“youth gangs” in Australia today. Among its findings are that American style criminal gangs are not prevalent in this country, although the preconditions for the emergence of such gangs are apparent. The paper shows that by and large the phenomenon of “criminal youth gangs” is largely a media myth. Furthermore, much of the publicised concern over youth gangs is linked to the ethnic background of particular groups of young people, which in turn raises major issues regarding youth opportunities and the policing of youth from selected social backgrounds. While “youth gangs” as such do not constitute a significant social problem, there is nevertheless evidence that young people on the street are engaging in activity that occasionally includes anti-social behaviour, criminal activity and group conflict. To address present and potential “gang” problems a range of social and economic measures as well as community effort, are required.

In recent times, there has been much public consternation regarding the perceived proliferation of youth gangs in Australia. Those fears have been fuelled, in no small part, by the surge in media reports promoting negative images of youth street activities: random violence, drug taking and distribution, and a range of other socially disruptive, illegal and/or predatory criminal activities have been disproportionately attributed to young people (see, for example, Healey 1996). Such “moral panics” over youth street behaviour are by no means new, as evidenced by the public concern over the push larrikins in Sydney in the 19th century (Murray 1973) and public reaction to the phenomenon of the “bodgies and widgies” in the middle of the 20th century (Stratton 1992).

Since the early 1990s, media reporting of youth collectives has, however, increasingly assumed a racialised character, with a range of ethnic minority groups (non-Anglo Australians who are non-Indigenous; Zelinka 1995)—including those of Somalian, Lebanese and Asian descent—being implicated in gang-related conduct (The Age 1993, 1995; White 1996; Pudney and Hooper 1999; Taylor 1999). The resultant waves of race-based public panic are customarily triggered by the sensationalised reporting of atypical events. This reporting tends to reinforce the “ethnic” character of the criminal activity in question, based on the “racial” background of the perpetrators—alleged gang members. For example, following the 1998 drive-by shooting of the Lakemba police station in Sydney, police alleged that a “Lebanese Youth Gang” was responsible.